

ONE

THE FALCONER'S MEWS,
THE VILLAGE OF THE TWELVE

The last of her seven falcons balanced on her wrist, Nova Chastain walked out onto the balcony once more. Her grey-brown eyes glistened, as if wet with dew; her dark hair, hanging low beneath the small of her back, was gently tangled from her previous trips out onto the windblown balcony. Already she had sent six of her falcons on their way, carrying their sombre messages to her six deputies at each of the border gates. The new day had barely announced itself but already Nova was weary. Her head ached and there was a gnawing sensation in her stomach, though she had no appetite for breakfast. It felt like an age since they had brought her the terrible news, but she knew from the changing light that it had been less than an hour ago that the Prince's Bell had sounded; the single chime that announced another Archenfield dawn. Albeit one which the Prince himself had not lived to see.

She had been watching, as was her habit, the budding of the new morning from her perch high above the Village of the Twelve when the Captain of the Guard's messenger arrived. Hearing his cold, hard words, she had turned away – eyes already stinging – to watch the golden sunlight nudge away the pink residue of dawn. The view across the Princedom was as beautiful as she could ever remember, but today its very beauty felt wantonly cruel.

The Falconer could feel her bird's eagerness to take wing and follow its six fellows; it moved impatiently from side to side on the worn leather gauntlet that encased Nova's slender left arm, from her muscled bicep to the tips of her fingers. Nova had saved her favourite bird until last. She held Mistral close a moment longer, knowing that once the falcon took flight, she would be alone with her grief. The Falconer's Mews, set atop its high tower, seemed a cold and lonely place when the falcons' roost was empty.

She conjured the image of her other six falcons, already in the air, soaring swiftly in their appointed directions across the Archenfield sky, carrying the bleakest of messages to the smaller mews at each of the gates:

Prince Anders has been killed. One or more assassins is on the loose. Close down the borders and take all other appropriate action.

After these two hard-won, barely savoured, years of peace, Nova knew what a gut-churning shock it would be to her comrades at each border mews to unfurl such an ominous note.

Stroking Mistral's small hooded head with the fingers of her free hand, Nova looked out across the landscape spread before her – the landscape she loved with a deep, visceral passion. She thought of how the news would travel swiftly, beyond the palace, beyond the Village and out to the settlements. Before

the setting of the sun, every man, woman and child might already share in the news of Prince Anders's assassination. Shock and grief would run amok, like the most aggressive forest fire – no, like a wind-borne plague. People who had never seen the Prince's face nor heard his voice would fall to the ground, keening in sorrow.

Unlike them, Nova had known the Prince: his face was as familiar to her as the sun; his voice as commonplace as the rustling of the trees. Imagining a world without him was as implausible as conjuring up a day without sun, wind or trees.

Nova attempted a steady breath. She was one of The Council of Twelve – the council that supported the Prince in ruling the Principedom. She knew she must try to tamp down her personal feelings and keep focused on doing the job required of her. The Captain of the Guard's messenger had briefed her with extreme clarity and she had executed his bidding to the letter. Just as she always did. No one could take issue with Nova Chastain's dedication to duty.

She nuzzled Mistral one last time. There had always been a particularly strong bond between the Falconer and this bird. She had always felt that she could sense Mistral's emotions, whether exhilaration or anxiety, and she was equally sure that the bird could intuit her own moods.

Now, she removed the bird's hood and gazed down fondly at Mistral's jewel-bright eyes. They served as twin mirrors to her own disquiet. The bird's head began moving jerkily about. Whenever her birds were free from their hoods, it felt as if they were thirstily drinking in every aspect of their surroundings. Often, she had the impression they were experiencing the world – its sights, sounds, scents and secrets – for the very first time each day.

The moment could be delayed no longer; it was time to set

Mistral free. Nova gave a practised flick of her wrist and the falcon extended her wings and took flight.

Watching her go, Nova felt suddenly weightless, giddy. She reached out both hands to grip the balcony. Snatching uneven gulps of air, she was distracted by signs of activity below her.

To the right was the dark blue-green forest, and beyond that the silvery fjord. Turning her gaze in the opposite direction, she saw a cluster of figures in the Glen – a hunting party. She strained her sight with the effort of identifying the figures, but her eyes soon budded with water again and her vision became blurred. She lifted a square of linen to absorb some of the moisture. As she drew it away again, she saw a lone horseman riding towards the glen.

She knew from the way he rode that it was Lucas Curzon, the Chief Groom. Lucas, her fellow on The Twelve, was one of the gentlest and noblest of men. He was a man of few words – to human companions at least: she had sometimes heard him, when he thought he was alone, deep in conversation with his horses.

Lucas must be taking a message to the hunting party. Piecing together the picture, Nova realised that Prince Anders's younger brother, Prince Jared, might be one of the hunters. Was it possible that the young prince did not yet know of his brother's fate? This thought sent a stabbing pain through her insides. She opened her mouth to cry out, but no sound would come. Her grief, she knew, was buried too deeply to be easily released. Holding her tender belly, she rocked to and fro for a moment, begging the pain to subside. But it was a stubborn hurt and she knew it would remain down inside her, submerged like a locked casket tossed to the depths of the fjord.

She knew this just as surely as she knew that dark and

difficult times lay ahead. Not just for her and the rest of The Twelve, but for all of Archenfield.

A sudden noise pulled her from her reverie. The North door had blown shut and with such force that one of the glass panes had cracked and shattered. A fresh pain searing through her head, Nova surveyed the fan of fallen shards.

It was best to go inside. For now, her work was done. She turned and approached the broken door. Though she opened it as gently as possible, more shards of glass fell through and shattered next to her boots. One of the fragments, carried perhaps on the wind, ricocheted up and embedded itself in the pad of her forefinger. She watched with horrid fascination as a bud of blood appeared there, and kept watching as it grew in size. It was rather like watching a rose bloom.

As the blood began to spill over the side of her finger, she lifted it to her lips and drew the metallic taste of it into her mouth. In a strange way, it comforted her, offering her some kind of fellowship with Prince Anders. She imagined, once more, life draining from the young and virile Prince. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the vivid image. But there it was, lurking horribly behind her eyelids.

‘Prince Anders,’ she whispered. Then, an even softer echo, ‘Anders.’ Her eyes were still tight shut. She felt a single tear snake down her cheek and fall saltily upon her blood-stained tongue.